# The Effects of Gender Bending on Humor:

# The Mutations of Dr. Amy Farrah Fowler

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

by

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Abstract

In 2010, the audience of the prime time hit *The Big Bang Theory* were introduced to Amy Farrah Fowler, who had the distinct characteristic of being a female version of the show favorite, Sheldon Cooper. Amy's introduction initiated an interesting experiment into the effects of gender on a character type, most specifically the difference in humor. This essay explores the debate surrounding women humor in sitcoms by studying *The Big Bang Theory* writers' use of Amy Farrah Folwer, from her conception in season four, into her further interaction and incorporation into the show. In particular, the study will focus on four specific episodes that each represents one aspect of the evolution of her humor: that of mirroring, crassness, self-deprecation, and compromise. Through the study of these particular branches of humor, the essay analyzes the implication of such humor on characterization and representation of women in the media.

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*Rule 63 of the Internet: "[F]or for every fictional character, there exists an opposite-gender counterpart" ("Rule 63").*

**Gender Blender**

If anyone spends enough time googling their favorite book/movie/television series character, they will undoubtedly learn the truth of Rule 63. Through fan art or fan fiction, fan guys and girls alike enjoy the challenge of representing the objects of their obsessions as the opposite gender than their creators intended. In Internet language, this act is called "gender-bending" and is a rampant practice on websites such as *Fanfiction.net, Deviantart.com,* and *Tumblr.* This desire to see cast members as the opposite sex is often exploited by the creators as well, for laughs or what is called "fanservice," which is an act of crowd-pleasing thrown in "just because," usually sexual in nature but not necessarily ("Fanservice"). This practice is extensive in anime/mangas, a medium where the creator's relationship to fans is incredibly intimate. For example, during an arc in the popular manga *Soul Eater*, all of the characters have a temporary sex change as they go through the "Lust" realm of the seven deadly sins, where they become their own ideal sexualization ("Gender Bender"). Through this concept, the creators get to stretch their creative muscles and not only imagine their characters as the opposite intended gender, but play it up for laughs.

Gender bending thrives on the fact that "a great deal of traditional humor has depended on a surprise switch of masculine and feminine roles" (Barreca, *They Used To Call* 35). The joke is usually short lived, and the changes are usually temporary because once the novelty wears off, the fans like the idea of returning to the status quo. There is one show that found a way to make this trial permanent, however, and the experiment has been so successful that it has contributed

to making it the top show on *CBS*. The sitcom is so popular that as of 2014, it was signed on for its second consecutive three-year contract, an honor reserved for "the biggest shows on television" (Andreeve). This show is of course *The Big Bang Theory*, and the fruit of their gender bending is the character of Amy Farrah Fowler.

It seems appropriate that a show built on nerd culture would find a way to use this concept. Fan favorites Sheldon Cooper, with his intellectually pouty antics, is a significant reason that the show made it past the pilot stage and into its now eighth season. While his own character had some forming to do from the drastically, and at times contradictory, different person of the first episode, he was well solidified by the third season. In fact, perhaps he was too stubborn to make a sustainable character arc without a drastic change in his environment. As with many sitcoms, especially in a show as romantically focused as *The Big Bang Theory,* the solution seemed to be a love interest. The audience was thirsting for the development at any rate, as evident by a March 2, 2010, poll where 70% of over 92000 participants voted that they wanted Sheldon to have a girlfriend ("Should Sheldon Get a Girlfriend?"). Audience support of the idea gave the writers the confidence to pursue the potential comedic gold of the setup.

The challenge for the writers was how to make sexually juvenile Sheldon realistically enter a romantic relationship. Many viewers like the potential conflict of the principle of "opposites attract," with 20% of the voters in the poll mentioned above wanting already existing cast member Penny to be that love interest. Several logistical reasons made the move too risky, one being the complication of her growing relationship with Sheldon's roommate, Leonard, and another being the lack of women in the show already. Also it did not logically fit into either Sheldon's or Penny's character, so any attempt would probably make the drama seem forced. The writers, therefore, decided that a new character needed to be introduced. Not just any woman

would do however, especially since, unlike his fellow male cast members, Sheldon had no desire to find love and, in fact, seemed entirely adverse to the idea. Sheldon, with his superiority complex, needed someone he intellectually respected, and, because of his childish obsession with comfort and control, he needed someone familiar. To the writers, the only person who Sheldon could love outside of himself romantically is himself. So why not make a female Sheldon, and fix both the problem of Sheldon needing a relationship and the show needing more women? In May of 2010, the creators did just that with the introduction of Amy Farrah Fowler at the very end of the episode "Lunar Excitation."

What this paper will be interested in exploring how a female counterpart to Sheldon would make use of Sheldon's characteristic humor, and what this says about the perceptions of women and humor in our society. In particular, this paper will first judge the success of the initial experiment, and then study the mutations her character would undergo once introduced to longer exposure to the show's universe. These "mutations" consist of humor based on crudeness and naiveté involving female sexuality, intentional and accidental self-deprecation, and excessive willingness for compromise. Amy Farrah Fowler as both experiment and test subject opens a conversation about gendered humor and how our expectations for both affect the way women in sitcoms are written.

**The Variables**

The contribution this show, especially in the character of Amy Farrah Fowler, makes to the debate of women's humor is interesting, but one question to be asked is why care about women and humor in general? It is tempting to say that to even try to break down humor into male or female forms is problematic because it disturbs the concept of the universality of comedy. While there is some merit in trying to study what is common among all forms of humor, it is a mistake to assume that humor can even be seen as universal. In fact, "it is rigidly mapped and marked by subjectivity. Almost every detail of our lives affect the way we create and respond to humor; age, race, ethnic, background, and class are all significant factors in the production and reception of humor" (Barreca, *Untamed* 12). So while there might be concepts or tropes that we find collectively heartbreaking and tragic, such as the death of a loved one or broken love affairs, there are fewer setups that will be seen as timelessly funny throughout all cultures, genders, and age groups. Comedies are dependent on time and context, which makes them an excellent site to study of the societal issues than other genres of work.

There can also be debates on whether women are funnier than men or even what specific differences there are between their humor, but without a societal context, the questions are, at best, interesting hypotheticals. However, humor does play a significant part in our construction of society because humor has the distinct role of not only forming personal identity, but group identity as well (Capps 59). This is true in everyday life, but becomes doubly imperative in sitcoms, where an individual's character depends on humor to gain attention and likability from the audience. If the audience does not find them funny, they are ignored and written out of the story. Amy had the rough task of moving away from a novelty premise to a three-dimensional character with staying power on the show. How the writers decided to manage this transition

through their humor choices and how the audience reacted to these choices reveals a lot about what makes a woman's identity valid and worth attention.

Research about the show gives special attention to a variety of issues affecting its viewers. Much of the commentary and analysis stays on the main protagonists of the show, Sheldon, Leonard, and Penny. As the newest member of the regular cast, not much has been said about Amy. However, her situation and character presents an important case study on gender performativity as it relates to humor. Gender performativity is a term coined by gender theorist Judith Butler and refers to the acts, conscious or unconscious, associated with portraying a person's gender. These acts are imperative to understanding gender identity, which is defined by the "stylized repetition of acts through time" (Butler qtd. in Speer and Potter 153). By basing Amy's character on someone who identifies as a man, she is placed in an interesting identity dilemma by beginning her life as a "female" version of this male persona. The show's portrayal of Amy as a woman cannot allow her to stay in this limbo without changing her actions to reflect more feminine performative acts due to "social sanctions and taboo" (Speer and Potter 153). In Amy's case, much of these taboos stem from societal expectations for woman to be socially sensitive and compromising. Both of these qualities are severely rejected in Sheldon's characterization, which is allowable because males who are antisocial and stubborn are more socially acceptable. Amy, however, starts to warp into this mold as her character identifies less with the Sheldon side of her character and more with her female side. These changes are reflected in a particularly striking way through humor, which is also performative in its nature. Amy's evolution as a character and how it forms her own identity gives an interesting look into the perceived effects gender has on the performativity of humor.

To help illustrate the shifts in this aspect of her gender performativity, I have picked an episode for each stage in her evolution that I felt best represented each phase. These episodes are analyzed using the scientific method and formatted as a lab report. This format is not simply chosen to pay homage to the scientific themes of the show, however. This method allows for a more thorough examination of the writers' motivations for making the changes to Amy's character that they did and how they decided to set up the plot to help reflect the characterization they were attempting. Each of the four points begins with an introduction to the lab report, then move into the examination of the episode's intentions and set up, as well as the results of that particular episode, and end with a broader analysis of how this aspect of humor permeates into the rest of the series and the effects it has on Amy's character identity.

**The Cloning**

*Exploring the evolution of Amy's humor requires a look at her first steps out of the cloning chamber. The task of assimilating into any sitcom is never an easy one, for both the writers and the actor, because breaking the status quo can be upsetting if not done correctly. While the undertaking was made easier by the audience's desire to have more female characters and to see Sheldon in a relationship, the show's writers and Mayim Bialik, the actress who plays Amy, still had a difficult task ahead of them if they wanted Amy to be an accepted character. She entered the scene at the very end of the twenty-third episode in the third season, "Lunar Excitement." The lab write-up below analyzes this opening experiment, showing the show's success with the strange humor phenomenon that occurs when the clone, Amy, is introduced to whom she has been cloned from, Sheldon.*

**The Mirror Effect**

**Statement of Problem:** Exploration of Sheldon Cooper's romantic life has become too theoretical; meaning the humor well from this situation has begun to dry up. To maintain the momentum of this side of his character, the audience demands experimental data.

**Hypothesis:** If Sheldon were to meet a worthy romantic partner, the show would be allowed to do more practical experiments to explore the romantic life of Sheldon Cooper. This person would have to be incredibly similar to Sheldon, almost clone-like, to get a realistic, response from Sheldon.

**Material:**

- Two friends who enjoy messing with Sheldon
- One dating website

- One female version of Sheldon
- One dirty sock

**Procedure:**

1. Sign Sheldon onto a dating website to find a match.
2. Locate and make a date with this match.
3. Threaten Sheldon with his fear of dirty sock to meet this female.
4. Have the two meet and record the reaction.

**Results:**

Sheldon Cooper is skeptical about the likelihood of a dating site finding the female equivalent of him, believing its algorithms to be faux science with "unsupportable mathematics designed to prey on the gullible and the lonely." Meeting someone he could respect quickly turned him from his doubts. The reason for this respect stems from a force other than her merit as a scientist. This could not have worked, despite her intellectual prowess being so high, because previous ventures have shown that introducing Sheldon to academic peers induced jealousy, not admiration. With the superiority complex that he possesses, one of the few people he esteems is himself. Therefore, meeting someone similar to him was one of the few paths to a connection. In this short exchange, Amy sufficiently proved that she is a near clone of him. She also has an "aversion to soiled hosiery," finds romantic notions to be a waste of time, has an overbearing mother, and is not at all fond of physical contact. On a subconscious level, Amy is familiar in her mannerism, having the same robotic movements and tones. Both of these factors make him reject his previous hypothesis that a dating website could find someone comparable to him and feels immediately comfortable around her.

This created a quick acceptance of Amy's character, with the audience easily laughing at her jokes, because they are already familiar with Sheldon's humor and personality, and have grown to love it over the past three seasons. What keeps the situation fresh and the humor potent is the absurdity of the premise. The audience is just as surprised as Raj and Howard that they were so similar, only they are more tickled by the situation than questioning, "what have we done." The audience's laughter certainly reveals the success of the experiment.

**Conclusion:**

If Amy had not been so similar to Sheldon, he never would have valued her enough to pursue a friendship and eventual relationship. For the show's logic, this was one of the few routes the writers could have taken to get their most beloved character into a romantic relationship. This pairing would give the show a large amount of new material and situations to put Sheldon through to help him get past his current level of stasis. At this point, the show is testing the waters to see if audiences would be interested in this exploration, and decides it is best to play it safe with the episode's comedy by choosing a humor that has already been tested and proven incredibly popular. For this reason, Amy sticks to Sheldon-esque jokes and delivery to quickly endear her to the audience. This technique is called the *mirror effect* because Amy is reflecting off of Sheldon's identity and her humor bounces off of his own.

The experiment was a success, but to recognize why is to understand how the *mirror effect* works in conjunction with comedy. This understanding begins with looking at a quote by esteemed comedian Roseanne Barr, who claimed, "The best comics are mirrors" (qtd. in Poniewozik and Goehner). This was part of a quote where Barr was complimenting another female sitcom heavyweight, Sarah Silverman, on her ability to imitate, yet somehow warp, male humor for her own comedic purposes. This is essentially what Amy is doing throughout this

scene, as well as a few of the following episodes, by mimicking Sheldon's humor. She is a female reflection of the beloved character, which gives her a quick in with the audience.

Her reflections go deeper than simply looking and acting like Sheldon. Her very description as a character, the "female Sheldon," could only be understood by knowing Sheldon first. This is why Amy's opening line of "I'm Amy Farrah Fowler, and you are Sheldon Cooper" is such a telling sentence. She is hinting at how the audience is meant to perceive her by instructing them to look at who she is through who they already know Sheldon to be. One of the main goals writers have when introducing a character into the sitcom universe is to establish their humor identity in a quick and recognizable way. Amy had under a minute and a half of screen time to express herself to the audience in a memorably hilarious way that would assert her right to stay. The writers deciding to define Amy by reflecting her off of an already existing character was not only a simple way to create this identity, but also an incredibly common way to define female identity in general. Susan Stanford Friedman explains how this is so in her book about women's identity creation in autobiography. Friedman explains how genders differ in their creation of self, stating that while males tend to define themselves through rejecting connection to others and independence, females thrive by emphasizing relationships to others and interdependence (77). Women, more so than men, depend on being compared to others to help understand themselves because "her mirror is the reflecting surface of cultural representation into which a woman stares to form an identity" (Friedman 75). Amy's character had to redirect that stare to the show's audience so that they could get an idea of who she was quickly.

In Amy's first few encounters in the show, her humor is completely dependent on Sheldon's existence for it to work. One example of this is the dramatic irony in the second episode she was featured in, "The Robotic Manipulation," where Penny takes Sheldon and Amy

on their very first date. In a painful scene where Penny is trying to force small talk and turns to Amy to change the subject by asking her about her work. Amy gets distracted from the question, however, when she notices that Penny's "check engine" light is on. The irony, as well as the laughter from the audience, comes from the fact that this is an ongoing joke between Sheldon and Penny, where Sheldon is always pointing the light out to Penny, much to her annoyance. Without that context, the joke is not nearly as funny, but the fact that this too bothers Amy, the female Sheldon, gives a twist to a tired joke. It also sets up an even bigger laugh when Sheldon has to explain to outsider Amy, "Don't bother, I've wasted many an hour tilting at that particular windmill."

Much of a sitcom's humor derives from characters bouncing off of one another, taking turns making the set-up and producing the punch line. Mayim Bialik admits to the truth of this in a 2011 interview when she talked about her working relationship with Jim Parson: "I do really enjoy the scenes where Jim and I get to banter--I look to him for pacing and delivery" ("The Big Bang Theory Interview"). With these beginning scenes, Bialik and the writers were very dependent on an already established Sheldon to start to shape a developing Amy. This link would later deviate as Amy becomes more defined, but she does start out as Sheldon's female clone. While having two characters exactly alike would get tedious in the long run, it is effective in these earlier episodes to assimilate Amy into the storyline.

**Mutation One**

*Once the novelty of the cloning wore off and Amy needed to stand on her own as a character, the first mutation began to form. In the same 2011 interview, Bialik was asked if she ever felt like she was competing with Parson because of the similarity of the two characters. She explained, "we serve different purposes, and I think it's interesting watching a female try to operate within the same framework that Sheldon does. The female socialization incorporates more playfulness." Eventually, it would become a more "playful" experience between the other cast members, especially the women. Bringing Amy into the female realm of the show, however, proved to be slightly clumsier than the first experiment, with humor that did not sit as well with audiences as Amy's first introduction. The following analysis is of Amy's first attempt to separate from Sheldon in the eighth episode of the fourth season, an episode named, "The 21-Second Extraction."*

**Middle Schooler Syndrome**

**Statement of Problem:** Amy needs to join the cast as a distinct entity and walk on her own without the comedic aid of Sheldon.

**Hypothesis:** If Amy is placed as a surrogate "Sheldon" in the female section of the cast, the writers can ease their way into making her stand alone without the risk of trying a different comedic method than that used to characterize Sheldon.

**Material:**

- One group of men going to see a movie that Amy is not too excited about
- Two friends planning a girl's night
- A childhood of social exclusion

- A deep seated desire to fit in with other members of her gender

**Procedure:**

1. Plan a night to see *Indiana Jones* in theatre with the male cast members and Amy.
2. Have the group meet at the Cheesecake Factory before the show.
3. Plan a girls' night with two already established female characters.
4. Have one of these characters reveal their plans to Amy.
5. Have Amy request to join this girls' night.
6. Have the girls accept.
7. Record results.

**Results:**

With the chance to be away from Sheldon and stand on her own, a strange phenomenon begins to occur. Amy reverts to her childhood, a regression brought on by the fact that she never had a sleepover before, unless she counted the night that she had her "tonsils removed" and shared a hospital room with "a little Vietnamese girl." This regression is a trait shared with Sheldon; however, where he regresses to acting childish and boyish, she reverts to the social awkwardness of puberty. Her interaction with the girls shows a social ineptness that causes her to say sexually inappropriate material in an attempt to fit in with the group. These disclosures not only make Penny and Bernadette uncomfortable, but unsettles the audience as well, with most of the writers' attempts at her humor met with awkward laughter from the audience as opposed to the freer and more carefree laughter exhibited at the other characters' jokes.

**Conclusion:**

This break from Sheldon gave the writers an opportunity to distinguish Amy from Sheldon, who to this point had been too similar to maintain as a recurring character. It is

interesting that while she is very aloof and Sheldon-esque with the guys, she changes drastically when in the company of Penny and Bernadette. She is a different type of obnoxious because, unlike Sheldon, she cares about understanding social codes and being part of the group. The writers' decision to make this manifest in one crass joke after another says something interesting about their understanding of how Amy's gender affects her humor. While they chose to make Sheldon sexually clueless and have a childish reaction to the subject, Amy acts as if she is a middle schooler who has just come out of sex Ed class. The humor comes from the expectation to be the exact opposite due to societal stereotypes of that men talk about sexual topics more than women. However, while Sheldon's naiveté endears him to the audience, it seems to estrange them from his female counterpart. This experiment is not as successful with the audience, and this type of immaturity will be weeded out slowly as the episodes progress and Amy is better defined.

Character wise, it is not surprising that Amy was this clueless about social interactions. *The Big Bang Theory* tries to make light of the social ineptness of the characters, but all of the "nerd" characters--that is, everyone but Penny--talk about some of the darker effects of being considered a geek, especially in their childhood. The men often make off-handed remarks about schoolyard torture by bullies, but Amy has the extra psychological issues of isolation from her peers. Sheldon was isolated too, but mostly because he was hardly ever with people his age because of his accelerated education process. Amy, on the other hand, had the chance to be with people her age, but her social clumsiness had always prevented her from joining any social group. In a 2012 interview, Bialik revealed a heartbreaking truth about the character she portrayed, saying, "[N]ot to get too deep and sad about it, but this whole world is new to her. Having friends, it's like a delayed adolescence for her" (Idato). Entering a friend group at any

age group is difficult, but with little to no experience, it is no wonder Amy had a hard time with it.

How the writers choose to portray this awkwardness is what is bizarre about the situation. It is no secret that the show does not always depend on the highest form of wit or "nerd" jokes to get the ratings. As Christopher Hitchens states in his controversial article, "Why Women Aren't Funny," "50 percent of all humor" is "filth...Filth and plenty of it. Filth in lavish, heaping quantities" (2). This principle seems to apply to the show, with its fair share of innuendos, hilarity involving sexual situations, and pick-up lines to make a woman blush or scrunch her face in disgust. Hitchens goes on to say that this fact of humor is "another principle that helps exclude the fair sex" because women tend to see their bodily functions as less of a laughing matter (2). Amy, especially in this episode, has no problem speaking about female anatomy. In fact, she refers to it so much that Penny is prompted to say, "You know Amy, when we say we're having girl talk, it doesn't mean that we just have to talk about our lady parts," to which Amy responds, "That's a shame. I had a real zinger about my tilted uterus." Admittedly, these are "smart" crass jokes, in that most of the jokes use heavily medical jargon, but they are crass jokes nonetheless.

Dirty jokes and humor is a complicated section of comedy that can either produce roaring laughter, from either the entire crowd or at least sections of it, or fall on dead silence. The writers had fiddled a lot with this type of humor before, especially with the character Howard Wolowitz, who often made comments crude enough to incite revulsion on other cast members' faces, especially Penny. Even he had been toned down a little by this point, however, because dirty humor is so often hit and miss. This could be because the writers depended on what Gershon Legman labels as "dirty dirty jokes." He defined these jokes as "not thought by anyone as being 'funny ha-ha,' nor do they ever raise a really enjoyable laugh.... Most often the laughter really

expresses relief that the story is at last over" (qtd. in Buble and Spritz 81). Depending on this type of humor, therefore, can fall miserably flat if it is one dirty dirty joke after another.

The problem of women and crude humor is one of the bigger debates in comedy. It is not that women do not make dirty jokes as much as men, but until recently "sharing sexual stories and jokes has long been an underground activity for women, a private set of experiences monitored as fiercely as our weight and kept just about as secret" (Barreca, *They Used to Call* 151). Often, audiences are much less likely to find woman telling sexual jokes as funny as men telling them, because it challenges feminine societal expectations. Julie Webber calls the phenomenon of women trying to get past this prejudice as "breaking the crass ceiling." She defines this "crass ceiling" as, "the seemingly shifting invisible limit (or tolerance) for a woman's public mode of the expression of humor. It is a ceiling in the sense that women can be crass but few audiences find them funny or reward them with laughter" (Webber 3). In addition to these joke still having a lingering taboo attached to them, female comedians run into the other problem of the dirty humor being different than male dirty humor, in both subject matter and delivery. As Regina Barreca states in her book *They Used to Call Me Snow White...But I Drifted,* "[W]e're surrounded by male-centered sexual jokes… these sound as if they're the only "real" jokes" (155). With both of these strikes against women, it is hard for crude humor told by women to be received well. While some female comedians, such as Sarah Silverman and Rosanne Barr, have broken past the crass ceiling to be considered effective at delivering crude jokes, the ceiling seems to still be holding, though it might very well be cracking. In the case of Amy Farrah Fowler, however, the humor did not sit as well with audiences, either because it is male dirty humor being told through the lips of a woman or the less familiar to audiences female

humor being told in public. This failure causes the writers to search for another outlet of humor to define her.

**Mutation Two**

*As the crude humor started to grate on the ears of the audience, the writers needed to explore other possible mutations that could produce better fruits. The writers needed to look for a way to make her less abrasive and more likeable or risk having her becoming a failure. They turned back to her childhood, this time focusing less on her social ineptness and more on the tragic rewiring that years of being a social outcast did to her self-esteem. Mayim Bialik once said in an interview, "I've spoken to people who say they feel like laughing and crying when they watch her....When her feelings were hurt someone said to me it was funny but also tender. She's a tender personality" (Idato). These comments reveal the reception of another experimentation with Amy's character that began to be implemented in the eighth episode of the fifth season, titled "The Isolation Permutation." In this episode, the audience gets their first glimpse at the dependence Amy's humor has on self-deprecation.*

**The Self Punching Bag Effect**

**Statement of Problem:** Amy's character needs a route of humor that diverges from Sheldon's and from the uncomfortable crudeness that was turning audiences off to her the more it was overused.

**Hypothesis:** If Amy shows some form of vulnerability through her humor, she will become endeared in the hearts of the cast members, as well as the audience.

**Materials:**

- One wedding in the works
- 2 friends secretly trying to ditch her
- One loud mouth fiancé

- One harp
- One Sheldon

**Procedure:**

1. Invite Amy to be a bridesmaid for the first time in her life.
2. Have bride and friend try to secretly go dress shopping without her.
3. Have bride text fiancé while dress shopping.
4. Have fiancé mention this shopping in Amy's presence.
5. Force Sheldon to go and console an emotional Amy Farrah Fowler.
6. Have Sheldon shout to friends to "get your women in line."
7. Record Results.

**Results:**

The experiment yields a heartbreakingly hilarious guilt trip that travels into the frailty of Amy Farrah Fowler. With this exclusion from her friends, a new form of humor comes to light that causes the audience to say a pained "aww" more than a few times. Her piteous past of social exclusion, though previously hinted at, is brought to the forefront and becomes the subject of a particular brand of humor. There is the laughter that comes from her tragically funny past and desire for attention. How this humor came out was through severely self-deprecating remarks, which is especially evident in the lab scene. In fact, her first line, after Bernadette and Penny enter, is to wave off their apology by saying, "That's not necessary. It's like Sesame Street says, 'One of these things is not like the other, one of these things should die alone.'" She acts as if the treatment she has received is part of the "natural order," which entails her being a feminine outcast. She uses science to try to reinforce this justification when she starts to examine the brain she is dissecting by saying, "This is us. Bernadette, you are the analytical, scientific left

hemisphere. Penny, you're the creative, spontaneous right hemisphere. And where's Amy? She's right here, the sad little tumor no one wants to go dress shopping with." The audience laughs, but mostly because it is too tragic to handle if they do not. So while the jokes work and the audience is laughing, it is not a comfortable laugh.

**Conclusion:**

The writers' attempts to make Amy more liked is guided by the idea of "double articulation," which is "an interaction between the on-screen televisual characters on the one hand, and an interaction between the characters and the audience on the other" (Bednarek 202). Sheldon somehow has the ability to be somewhat liked by everyone in the cast, despite his superiority complex and intolerable behavior. This somehow endears him even more to the audience, who adore him because they do not have to deal with him. Amy does not have that luxury, being a latecomer to the show, as well as a near copy of an existing character. This means that for Amy to be accepted by the audience, she needs to be accepted by the other cast members. Amy, however, is the social outcast of the group, despite all of her attempts to incorporate herself. The writers therefore turn to an age-old trick of self-deprecation to win laughter as well as pity.

Why this type of humor is so popular in comedy is found in the branch of humor theory known as the "Superiority Theory." This theory states that most of what humans find funny is "the association… of humour with malice and abuse towards people marked as deficient" (Carroll 8). Amy is certainly marked in this way, but instead of allowing others to make her the butt of the jokes, she makes up the joke for them. This is a very understandable move on the writers' part because, as Barreca claims, "the self-deprecating joke is considered to be the most 'traditional' form of women's humor." She later explains why this humor works so well by

saying, "We get to make fun of ourselves before, and better than, anyone else. We beat the others to the punch line and render ourselves the victim. This makes people in positions of power comfortable" (*They Used to Call* 25). The people of power in this case are the audience, who want to laugh as well as hug Amy for all of the heartache she has had to take in her life.

Throughout the series, Amy reveals a tragic life story, which somehow induces laughter instead of pity. For example, in the episode "The Santa Simulation," Amy has an exchange with another character, Raj, who though male is ironically portrayed as the most feminine members of four male cast members, that depends heavily on this type of humor,. After Raj has accidentally insulted Amy by saying that he has never been attracted to her, despite being attracted to both Penny and Bernadette, he tries to apologize. This becomes a "my love life is more tragic than yours" battle, where the two of them try to make the other feel better by one-upping them on their experience. When Raj says that when he tried to play spin the bottle in middle school and the girl it landed on threatened to cut him if he tried to kiss her, Amy counters with, "You think that's bad? In college, I passed out at a frat party and woke up with more clothes on." Then when Raj tries to seem more desperately lonely by saying that he sometimes sits on one of his hands until it goes numb to pretend he is holding another person's hand, Amy comes back with, "I do that, too. Sometimes the left hand tries to cop a feel. And I let it." The two pull at the heartstrings, but strangely tickle the funny bone at the same time.

This could be caused by what humorist theorist Noël Carroll likes to call "Emotional Incoherence," where "a character matches the wrong feeling or attitude with a situation" (25). Much of Amy's humor in these situations is the absurdity of her reactions to socially hurtful events, be it the excruciatingly pathetic overreactions to her friends not including her or the deadpan underreaction of the terrible pains of her childhood. These paradoxical reactions create a

strangely dependable type of comedy. For example, Sarah Silverman claims that while much of her jokes depend on "gratuitous bathroom humor," much of it is simply knowing how to be hilariously "heartbreaking" (Poniewozik and Goehner). While Amy could not pull off crude humor as well as Silverman, she has found her way into the audience's funny bones by turning herself into a punching bag.

**Mutation Three**

*The third and final mutation, which seems to be the current main source of Amy's identity, stems from her role in "Shamy" (Sheldon/Amy's couple name). The writers realized that Sheldon was too much of an uncompromising force to be swayed and changed by another stubborn figure. They would clash and destroy the other, which is entertaining at first, but not sustainable. Amy could not be persuasive like Penny because, unlike Leonard, Sheldon has next to no sex drive and Amy is not confident enough to be assertive. She could not use Bernadette's tricks either, because, unlike Howard, Sheldon cared nothing about having a woman, nor does Amy have a financial advantage of a better paying job to hang over Sheldon. Amy could only depend on a realistic tool to get Sheldon to do what she wanted, and that was her willingness to compromise what she ultimately wanted for something that was, at least, half way down the road to her goal. In this way, her evolution has come full circle, only to reveal that while the original experiment called for her to be exactly like Sheldon, she could share Sheldon's abstinence if there was any hope of advancing their relationship. This humor trait first appears in a significant way in the twelfth episode of the fifth season in "The Shiny Trinket Maneuver."*

**The Compromise Combustion**

**Statement of Problem:** Sheldon needs to change and grow in his relationship, but he cannot know that it is being done, or he will run from whoever is trying to change him.

**Hypothesis:** If Amy makes him aware and calls him out on his stubbornness and insensitivity, but forgives him when he makes half attempts to change, then maybe, over time, Sheldon will fully change.

**Material:**

1 Sheldon (add a dash of extra arrogance and cluelessness)

1 academically published article in the magazine *Neuron*

100th Twitter follower

1 interpreter of the female mind

1 tiara

**Procedure:**

1. Have Sheldon and Amy go on date.
2. Reveal Amy's recently published article in *Neuron.*
3. Have Sheldon ignore excitement when he learns he has 100 followers on Twitter.
4. Allow Amy to become upset and leave the room.
5. Have interpreter, Penny, verbally smack Sheldon over the head for being insensitive and tell him to apologize.
6. Make Sheldon refuse.
7. Suggest that Sheldon at least get Amy a gift to pretend he is sorry.
8. Buy Amy a tiara.
9. Record results.

**Results:**

The entire episodes seems to be moving towards one punch line that results in a phenomenon called *compromise combustion*, where the compromise is so outrageous, but so hilariously and enthusiastically accepted by Amy, that the audience cannot help but laugh. In this instance, Amy is bent on not forgiving Sheldon for his apathy towards her accomplishment unless he makes a proper and genuine apology. She is at first insulted at Sheldon's attempts to

mend his mistake with a gift, even scoffing at the wrapping of Sheldon's gift by saying, "Jewelry? Seriously? Sheldon, you are the most shallow, self-centered person I have ever met." However, the payoff of the joke comes when she tries to continue her rant, only to be filled with girlish glee. Amy's response, "Do you really think another transparently manip-- Oh! It's a tiara! A tiara! I have a tiara! Put it on me, put it on me, put it on me, put it on me, put it on me, put it on me, put it on me!" is one of the largest laughs of the episode.

**Conclusion:**

Amy has again diverged from Sheldon by becoming his foil. While Sheldon often goes through emotional turmoil when he is not given what he wants, it is always presented as him being unreasonable. However, the characters are generally lenient to his stubbornness, and it is a surprise when he does not get his way. Amy's emotional strife, however, comes from an understandably upsetting situations, in this case her academic achievement not being seen as real "science" by her boyfriend and therefore not worthy of congratulations. The audience is with her in believing that she should get her way; however the writers decide to make the humor of her situation be her excitement over a sparkly substitute.

While this dynamic is funny in its absurdity, it does present a few problems. This joke in particular white washes any of its attempts to weigh in on some serious issues in science. In particular, the writers sidestep two significant subjects: one, the "softer" sciences being viewed as less valuable and two, the treatment of female contribution as "lesser" than male contributions. The episode initially slaps Sheldon on the hand by saying that his conduct with his girlfriend was wrong and backwards. This starts out as being a constructive use of humor, which has the ability to "draw our attention to the way in which the heuristics, schemas, and rules of thumb that we employ in order to navigate our way through everyday life can misfire" (Carroll

78). Sheldon believes the hegemonic stereotypes of science, but he is punished for his view by being forced to apologize. However, the ending, and the laughter that it produces, shows a disturbing conclusion to discussion of these very relevant issues. The problem is that humor can also reinforce norms (Carroll 83). This is because, as Elliott Oring explains in his book *Engaging Humor*, "humor undoes a sentimental, or any sincere, message" (78). This joke, though well received by the audience, creates a real problem in the debate they were trying to engage, because it makes Sheldon's crime become minor after Amy throws out her anger on the issue over something frivolous.

The compromising wife/girlfriend trope is a very common device used in sitcoms. In "Beauty and the Patriarchal Beast: Gender Role Portrayal in Sitcoms Featuring Mismatched Couples," the two sitcoms discussed revealed another example of this expectation of compromise. Looking at the wives of *According to Jim* and *King of Queens,* the authors found a running theme in the episodes. Many of the stories they pointed to saw wives holding out defiantly against their husbands for being openly sexist or stupid, but in the end, the women are the ones who bend, either out of exhaustion or trickery on the husbands' part, to their will, sometimes even admitting guilt. The authors' analysis of those sitcoms can help illuminate a similar problem with Amy and Sheldon. In all the examples, while "the shows have the wives making jokes and the audiences (or laugh track) laughing at the sexism and foolishness of their husbands in many scenes, the 'beast' gets ritualistically redeemed at the end of every episode" (Walsh, Fürsich and Jefferson 131). By having Amy accept his peace offering so quickly, Sheldon is redeemed in the end because if Amy is okay with the apology, the audience should be as well.

This obligation of compromise seems to be the comedic cross that Amy has to bear. Much of her humor, especially with Sheldon, consists of her attempts to get what she wants being foiled. This is especially evident in her attempts to make their relationship go to the next level in any way. She constantly has to play by Sheldon's rules, especially when it comes to affection. For example, in the episode "The Flaming Spittoon," Amy finally succeeds in convincing Sheldon that he actually wants to become more than friends, a task that she had been working on for several episodes at this point. To enter this relationship, however, she must sign one of Sheldon's trademark contracts. Reading aloud one of the clauses she says, "'Hand-holding. Handholding is only allowed under the following circumstances. A: Either party is in danger of falling off a cliff, precipice or ledge. B: Either party is deserving of a hearty handshake after winning a Nobel Prize. C: Moral support during flu shots.' Seems a bit restrictive." Sheldon leaves no room for discussion, saying only, "Feel free to retain a lawyer." The show, as well as the humor caused by the couple's situations, is dependent on Amy accepting these terms, despite the terms being only a baby step closer to breaking down the giant physical affection barrier Sheldon has put between the two.

This causes viewers to recognize a very interesting branch of Amy's humor, which has emerged because she has had to learn the art of manipulation to get anything done. For example, in the episode, "Table Polarization," Leonard and Penny decide to get a table against Sheldon's wishes. When Sheldon attempts to reveal to Leonard that the only reason he got the table was because Penny has changed him, the couple turns the argument on Sheldon by saying that Amy has changed Sheldon. He finally concedes that Leonard was right and then exits, saying, "You've opened my eyes to the truth. Amy has made me a more affectionate, open-minded person. And that stops now." When he makes it to Amy's house to break up with her, she turns

the argument back on him, making him believe that Leonard was manipulating him by distracting him with their relationship. Ultimately the joke turns on Amy when she believes that her own manipulation has begun to work and, while she is telling Sheldon what to say, she says, "You're sick of his nonsense and ready to move in with me." Without missing a beat, Sheldon gives up on his long fought battle with, "Keep the table. We don't use the space." Amy curses her false step by saying, "Damn it, I got cocky." The audience sees these outrageous attempts at Amy to move the relationship forward as hilarious and even more funny when it backfires on her.

At this point in the show's history, Amy has not made any steps to show that any other mutation is going to occur. She has deviated significantly from the Sheldon she was cloned from. While that change does give her a very interesting and distinct character, it shows a strange effect gender can have on how a person is perceived and received in a sitcom universe. While Sheldon has hardly had to change at all as far as his humor goes, Amy has had to go through several deviations to see which brand of humor will endear her to the audience. It was this manipulation of the character, as opposed to actual events of the plot, that have defined her character arc. She has not had much room to grow within the show's universe because her existence from the start depended on her being a tool for another character's growth.

**Missed Opportunities**

With an average of nearly 20 million viewers per episode, *The Big Bang Theory* has by far the highest viewership of any non-sporting event on television (Andreeve). With so many eyes constantly on this show, its potential to impact societal constructs and cultural norms with its characters and humors is a very real possibility. In particular, the show's capability to weigh in on currently stiff constructs of women's identity in media through characters such as Amy could help with a cultural shift, due to what is know as *Bergson's Mechanical Humor Theory.* This theory states that humor can be created when rigidity in societal norms is challenged. In this way, "humor is the solution to rigidity. Laughter acts as a 'social corrective'" (Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, Jr. 54). Amy's character, especially her affiliation with "nerd" identity, could offer one possible corrective to this system of gender roles and norms in particular.

With the show's main audience being millennials, and the millennials being the generation now coming of age to take positions of power as the driving force of our society, *The Big Bang Theory* has a many opportunities to become more than simply entertainment (Shaw 78). Presenting an alternative to conventional femininity can be a powerful and liberating tool to the audience members. In fact, according to the article "Deconstructing the Women of *The Big Bang Theory:* So Much More Than Girlfriends," Amy is already "highlighting the absurdity of gender expectations that deny a smart but not conventionally attractive female the full status of 'women' with her interest and appearance" (White and Fisher 249). This potential comes from the fact that, as Mary Buscholtz states in her study on the behavior of nerd girls in high school, "nerdiness" is actually a "valuable resource for girls in the gendered world" (211); it "offers an alternative to the pressures of hegemonic femininity – an ideological construct that is at best incompatible with, and at worst hostile to, female intellectual ability" (213). Buscholtz' study,

though associated with high-school-aged nerds, presents an interesting possibility for the show because, as Janice Shaw explains in her article "*The Big Bang Theory:* Nerds and Kidults," it depicts "a group of friends who conform to the popularized concept of 'kidults,' or young adults who are still living like teenagers, and in the process promotes a reconsideration of the defining aspect of the defining aspects of adulthood as they apply in a millennial context" (78). To present Amy, who is already going through a delayed adolescence, as growing and being empowered by her female nerd identity would present an interesting and unique take on current direction of womanhood as a whole. In her character's infancy, Amy seemed to have the potential of presenting a strong, female intellectual presence in the show, being shown as equal in wit, if not superior at times in social understanding, to Sheldon. Audiences cannot see this concept being enacted, however, as the manipulation of her character's humor makes her seem uncomfortably vulgar, laughably pitiful, and entirely submissive.

The show seems to be following an older, and perhaps more male, models of how "nerds" are incorporated into a societal system. Buscholtz presents a study by David Kinney that argued "in order to succeed socially, nerds must undergo a process of 'recovery of identity' that involves broadening one's friendship network, participating in extracurricular activities, and heterosexual dating" (211). In the course of the show, this process is exactly what Amy undergoes to gain acceptance into the group as well as into the hearts of the viewers. Her humor is often manipulated towards that end as we see in her attempts to incorporate into the female group in "The 21-Second Extraction" or the lengths to which she will go to maintain her relationship with Sheldon in episodes such as in "The Shiny Trinket Maneuver." While some molding and personality concessions can be necessary to gain audience acceptance, Amy's bending backwards, especially compared to the character she is cloned from, seems excessive.

When her intellectual humor seemed to be turning off the audience, they turned to crass humor to play up the notion that women who talk about their sex drive more often than most women is funny. When her stoicism made her seem unrelatable, they introduced a pained emotional past that made her say and do tragically hilarious things. When her obstinence towards other character's flaws seemed too serious, they lightened the mood with her compromising reversals. All of these changes in humor do get her away from her clone Sheldon, but in a way that does not challenge current gender norms.

This is not to say that Amy has never used her humor to challenge these norms. In fact, some of her finer moments involve her forcing another character to see the error of his stubbornness or arrogance, and this is always done with a brand of mockingly deadpan humor that shows the power of her character. One episode in particular in the fifth season, called "The Vacation Solution," involves Amy forcing Sheldon to give an actual apology for his actions after he believes that because of his "genius" status and his study in a "superior" science, Amy has no right to make him do menial tasks in her lab. After some bickering, Sheldon finally insults Amy by saying, "You think you're doing science by cutting up that brain? They could do the same thing at any Quiznos. And they'd offer to toast it for me, too." Amy decides to prove to Sheldon how wrong he is by handing him the knife and asking him to remove the locus coeruleus from the brain she is working on, which is the width of a single hair. Sheldon, his fear flimsily covered up by arrogance, takes up the challenge and shakily tries to detach it. When he sees blood he asks, "Does the locus coeruleus normally bleed this much?" With a devilish smile Amy answers, "No. But your thumb does." Sheldon then faints, to which Amy responses sarcastically, "Yeah, you're a biologist." This entire scene is filled with hearty laughter from the audience, showing that the audience enjoys this side of Amy. The episode even ends with Sheldon, with a little

shaming from Penny, feeling a sense of remorse. However, Amy does not give in to a simple apology, especially since he is more sorry for the severed relationship than from actually believing that he did anything wrong. Sheldon tries every trick in the book to defer the blame, including blaming it on "the loss of blood," Amy's sensitivity, and not being able to handle his genius. Eventually, through Amy's insistence, Sheldon makes a real apology. Even then, Amy knows that it is still slightly insincere and, though she forgives him, she punishes him by forcing him to clean the beakers that started the whole argument in the first place. In this episode, Amy does not turn to mirroring, crudeness, self-deprecation, or compromise; arguably this episode shows Amy at her best. This type of humor fits her character as well as challenges the norms of the show in a meaningful way. Sheldon is one of the most unmovable forces of the series, but by constant resistance, Amy is the one that changes him the most. Despite its effectiveness, however, it is one of the rare examples of the writers utilizing this part of Amy's identity. The problem is that these devices are not used enough, which might be why Amy is still a secondary character.

The episode does present an alternative form for Amy's humor that fits her particular feminine identity much better than her current humor crutches. This is because true female humor has frequently had a different feel and purpose than male humor. According to Regina Barreca in her book *Untamed and Unabashed,* "much of women's comic play has to do with power and its systematic misappropriation.... Humor allows [women] to gain perspective by ridiculing the implicit insanities of a patriarchal culture" (12). In the context of *The Big Bang Theory,* cultural issues of women and science, as well as representation of women who participate in the "nerd" lifestyle in general have the capacity to speak to bigger and larger ideas of women in STEM careers and conventional forms of gender performativity. However, the tools

of humor used characterize Amy frequently work against these goals. The realm of female humor is often in "irony, puns, repartee, irreverence and sarcasm--towards those arrogantly occupying positions of power" (Barreca, *Untamed* 22), not mirroring dominant forms of humor, like male-centric crude humor, self-deprecation, and compromise. All the latter forms depend on deferring the power of the joke to other cast members or on hegemonic norms and do not empower the model of womanhood Amy is presenting or the issues that her character faces.

It is clear that our society is in a transitional period where the old ways of humor, along with its misunderstanding of what makes female humor shine, are starting to be questioned and explored. Amy seems to be caught in the middle, with the potential to take the sitcom female to different heights of hilarity, but her character remains stuck by what writers think "works." This misinterpretations of female humor may stem from how few woman writers there are in mainstream sitcoms, with *The Big Bang Theory* being one of the many writer's rooms severely lacking in feminine presence. Of the twenty-seven credited writers in the series' now eight season history, five of those writers have been female, with only two, Tara Hernadez, with 42 episodes, and Maria Ferrari, with 86 episodes, making a sizable contribution to the shows content. Even Ferrari's considerable influence is nothing compared to the two creators, Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady, 186 episode writing credits ("Full Cast & Crew: The Big Bang Theory"). With so little female involvement in the writing process, it is understandable that these misrepresentations of female humor would persist.

It is clear what problems sticking to the status quo can cause, but the fact that these characters still exist shows a lack of congruency with women in society. As Stanley points out, "female viewers outnumber men by approximately 30 percent during prime time" (2). *The Big Bang Theory* clearly occupies this prime time, so why are the viewers content with humor that is

subpar compared to what they are more inclined to find funny? This already hilarious show could become even more of an uproar if the writers used humor that is more natural than the devices they are currently using. More importantly, however, is the question why do the viewers accept the messages the show is portraying if they do not challenge the forces that are potentially oppressing them? Humor that is safe might keep ratings steady, but humor that challenges norms can potentially enact change in the society at large, as well as tickle the audience in a different way. A joke is always infinitely funnier when our societal inhibitions or even outside institutions tell us not to laugh. Just think about two school kids holding back laughter at a teacher's unintentionally hilarious comment because they do not want to get in trouble for disrespecting them. It therefore makes more sense for writers of sitcoms to challenge our indoctrinations in creatively humorous way because that will create much hardier laughs. It is clear that characters like Amy Farrah Fowler have that type of potential, it is just a matter of writers deciding to tap into it.

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